Part IV

IS IT STILL SABBATH WITHOUT OZZY?

Chapter 11

It's Not Sabbath Unless Ozzy's the Singer (But It's Fine If You Disagree)

James Bondarchuk

Black Sabbath arose from the working-class ashes of Birmingham, England in 1968. The original "Sab Four" included guitarist Tony Iommi, bassist Terry "Geezer" Butler, drummer Bill Ward, and a 20-year-old ex-burglar and aspiring singer named John "Ozzy" Osbourne. Together they created a style of music that was significantly heavier, darker, and more powerful than that of their immediate predecessors in Cream or colleagues in Led Zeppelin and Deep Purple. For a solid decade this motley cast of Black Country brummies pushed hard rock to new heights of heaviness, but internal tensions and changing circumstances precipitated a series of line-up changes. While no doubt the most significant of these changes was the replacement of Ozzy Osbourne by Ronnie James Dio in 1979, it was far from the only one. To date, at least 30 people have been considered "members" of Black Sabbath, with founding member Tony Iommi the only constant presence in the band.[1]

Despite these line-up changes, one thing is for sure: hard rock and metal fans take their Sabbath very seriously. For many, myself included, Black Sabbath is not just another hard rock or metal band; they are the soundtrack of our inner lives, heaviness distilled, the archetype for all the Judas Priests and Iron Maidens that followed. Only trouble is, when it comes to the post-Ozzy line-ups, we Sabbath fans can't seem to agree on much. Many—the "purists"

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among us—insist that only the group consisting of the four original members is the true Black Sabbath. Others are willing to acknowledge that the band helmed by Ronnie James Dio into the early 1980s was an authentic continuation of Black Sabbath, but draw the line there. And a small but vocal minority of fans insist that later groups that recorded as Black Sabbath—including ones in which guitarist Tony Iommi was the sole remaining original member—were the genuine article. But which of these bands were really Black Sabbath, and which, if any, were merely Sabbath in name only?

I am firmly in the purist camp. Don't get me wrong; I really enjoy some of the later albums, but they just do not feel like Sabbath to me, and I wish they had been released under different names. For my money, Sabbath will always be identified with the four original members and the eight groundbreaking studio albums they recorded together in the 1970s. But despite being an outspoken purist, I have some sympathy for the arguments that non-purists regularly put forward. All of us—purists and non-purists alike—deserve to present our case before what the philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) called the "court of reason."[2] With this in mind, I hope to shed some light on this debate by appealing to the standards and methods of philosophy.

Mastering Metaphysical Reality: Why Geezer Butler Isn't a Plank of Wood

Philosophers often want to get a sense of the kind of question they are trying to answer, in the hope that doing so will provide insight into how they might go about answering it. If we're not clear about the kind of question we're trying to answer, we're just going to end up spinning the wheels of our own confusion. For instance, many ordinary questions can be settled by simple observation, but the question concerning whether some group of musicians is "really" Black Sabbath isn't such a question. Sure, we can observe whether these musicians ever toured as "Black Sabbath," whether they ever recorded an album under that name, and so forth; but any such observation we make will have to be informed by some prior principle for deciding whether that observation is relevant to our question. For instance, suppose you say, "Ronnie James Dio was a member of Black Sabbath. After all, he is listed as the singer in the liner notes to *Heaven and Hell*, and that

album clearly says 'Black Sabbath' on the cover." Of course, no one disputes that Dio sang on that album or that it was released under the name "Black Sabbath." What people disagree about is the implicit principle you've relied on—that releasing an album under the name "Black Sabbath" makes you a member of Black Sabbath, or what amounts to the same, that a line-up that records as "Black Sabbath" is, in fact, Black Sabbath. The upshot is that we need a principle for settling the question of whether any such group is Black Sabbath or not—and that's not the kind of thing that could be settled by observation alone. Instead, it will require a bit of philosophical inquiry.

Minimally, such a principle would have to specify what philosophers call "necessary" and "sufficient" conditions for whether a band is Black Sabbath. If a group of musicians fails to satisfy the necessary conditions, then that group is not Black Sabbath; if a different group satisfies the sufficient conditions, then it is. We combine the notions of necessary and sufficient conditions in the thought that a band counts as a genuine instance of Black Sabbath "if and only if" certain conditions are satisfied.

Such a principle might still be inadequate for our purposes, however, because if such a principle were able to determine *whether* a particular band is Black Sabbath, it might leave us wondering *why* that band is or is not Black Sabbath. To be able to answer the latter question, we need to know what Black Sabbath is essentially. This takes us into the branch of philosophy called metaphysics, which is concerned with the ultimate nature of reality. Traditionally, metaphysicians concerned themselves with such lofty questions as whether God exists or whether human beings possess freedom of the will. We are concerned with a question that, to at least some, will seem no less important: the ultimate nature of Black Sabbath.

Since we're thinking about the metaphysics of Black Sabbath, it might be helpful to see how this problem compares to similar metaphysical questions. You might think our question really amounts to this: how many members of Black Sabbath can we replace before we have an altogether different band? More specifically, what is the relation of the "parts" (the individual members) of the band at any given time to the identity of the "whole" (the band itself) across time? When we put the question this way, it resembles a classic philosophical problem known as the "Ship of Theseus Paradox," which was originally posed by the Greek thinker Plutarch (ca 45–120 CE).

Suppose we replaced one plank on a wooden ship. We are disposed to judge that the resulting ship is the same ship as before—that it is identical with the preceding one. This is because we generally think that by replacing a single plank of wood, we don't thereby change the identity of the ship; it's the same ship as before.

Now, suppose we replaced another plank of wood. According to the principle that says that by replacing one plank of wood we retain the same ship, we must conclude that the resulting ship is identical with the preceding one. Notice, however, that by repeating this process and replacing the planks one-by-one we will eventually have a ship whose parts are altogether different from that of the original ship. But now we face the following problem: how can two ships whose material parts are altogether different from each other—the one we started with and the one we ended with—be the same ship?

Even if this question doesn't worry us and we accept that the resulting ship is identical with the original one, the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) pointed out that we now face an even more difficult problem. Suppose we gathered up all of the original planks of wood and built a ship from them. Would *that* ship be identical with the one we started with? Intuitively, we think that a ship built in the same fashion out of all of the original planks of wood must be identical with the original one. But now that means we have two non-identical ships both of which are identical to the original one—an evident contradiction. We can see that Hobbes's example threatens the very plausible assumption that we can replace a single plank of wood and preserve the identity of the ship.[3] Perhaps we're better off saying that we cannot retain the same ship by replacing one of its planks. In a similar way, we might say that we cannot retain the same band by replacing any of its members.

Unfortunately for our purposes, the two cases seem to evoke very different beliefs. Before we tangle ourselves up in metaphysical knots trying to solve these problems, we are generally apt to judge that we can preserve the identity of a ship by replacing one of its planks. By contrast, we are generally less disposed to think that we can preserve the identity of a band by replacing any individual member. This suggests that the planks from our example do not play a role exactly analogous to that of the members of a band. A plank of wood has a certain well-defined function in the composition of a ship, and it can be easily replaced by another object as long as that object performs that same function. But

to the extent that it's even appropriate to speak of an individual musician's having a certain "function" within a band, we don't generally think that a musician's primary value or contribution is the kind of thing that can be so easily replaced. A musician brings a particular style to bear in his or her playing or performing, a style that is the culmination and expression of that musician's influences and experiences.

This ineliminable human component doesn't really fit the model presented to us by Theseus's ship. By trying to imagine "N.I.B." without the low end of Geezer's fluid bass lines, or "Electric Funeral" without Ozzy's characteristic wail, we see at once how important these particular individuals are to the essence of, if not Black Sabbath, then at least these songs. By saying this I don't mean to assume that these musicians could never be replaced without fundamentally altering what is essential about Black Sabbath. I just mean to say that we need to look elsewhere for a comparison. Although he might not have Ozzy's animated personality, there is at least one respect in which Geezer Butler is unlike a wooden plank.

Perhaps organizations like nation-states or sports teams provide a better basis for comparison, since they are constituted by persons instead of planks. But again, such comparisons tend to evoke the wrong beliefs. After all, it is expected that the players on a sports team (or the citizens of a political body) will eventually be replaced or die out. No one who claims "I have been a die-hard Yankees fan my whole life and I always will be" identifies the Yankees with any particular roster of players, and if our imagined fan is fortunate, she will live long enough to see her beloved Yankees with a completely different collection of players. (Moreover, anyone who has listened to a few minutes of sports radio will be acquainted with the zeal with which certain fans are willing to trade and fire players for the betterment of the "team.") By contrast, it is not generally expected that the members of a band will eventually be replaced. In particular, almost no one believes that a band without any original members could be a genuine version of Black Sabbath.

Behind the Wall of Thought Experiments

Since looking to other bases for comparison hasn't seemed too promising, I propose we subject to philosophical scrutiny the principles and maxims most frequently cited by actual Sabbath fans to support

their beliefs about which line-ups were really Sabbath. We will proceed by devising what philosophers call "thought experiments." These are experiments of a special sort—the kind we can perform simply by thinking hard about a problem. We can "test" each principle by determining where it stands on particular cases, including crazy scenarios that we devise in our heads, and seeing whether each principle agrees with our beliefs. An initially plausible principle might have to be rejected because it gives what we consider to be an obviously wrong answer on some scenario that we devise. (We've already seen an example of this with the Ship of Theseus Paradox.) By proceeding in this way we might shed some light on the essence of Black Sabbath and reach some positive conclusion about Sabbath's identity.

To start with the most obvious (and popular) principle: *a band is Black Sabbath if and only if it comprises the four original members of Black Sabbath*. This is the principle most often cited by the purists who insist that Sabbath ceased to exist during the years that Ozzy was not in the band. We might read this principle as just an instantiation of the more general principle that says that a band consists of its original members only, and any line-up changes result in an altogether different band. More specifically, such a principle states that *for any band X, a band Y is identical with X if and only if the members of Y are all and only the original members of X*. However, while this principle might be true in the case of Sabbath, it is apt to clash with our intuitions about the identities of other bands.

For instance, according to the more general principle, Metallica was no longer "really" Metallica after Ron McGovney, their original bassist, was fired from the band and replaced by Cliff Burton. Of course, McGovney did not play on any of the early studio albums that defined Metallica's sound. We might get around this objection by identifying (somewhat arbitrarily) the members of a band with those individuals who performed on a band's first album. But again, the principle overreaches. For according to it, Bruce Dickinson was never a member of Iron Maiden, since the principle implies that a band is Iron Maiden only if Paul Di'Anno (who performed on Maiden's first two albums, and who was replaced by Bruce Dickinson) is a member. (Many if not most Maiden fans consider the version of the band helmed by Dickinson to be its classic line-up.)

If instead we interpret this principle as saying something specific about Black Sabbath—that while some other bands can have their

original members replaced and retain their identity as a band, Sabbath cannot—we run into a different problem: it does not explain why Black Sabbath is necessarily constituted by its original members while those other bands aren't. The principle might then be true, but utterly unilluminating as to the essence or identity of Black Sabbath. Moreover—and this is where a little thought experimentation comes in handy—let's suppose the four original members of Black Sabbath decided to tour under a totally different name and play nothing but piano covers of Justin Bieber songs. The proposed principle implies that *that* band would still be Black Sabbath. To some (myself included) this would be a *reductio ad absurdum* of the principle. Therefore, as far as this principle is concerned, this is one case where the mob doesn't rule.

This might suggest that *a band is Black Sabbath if and only if (1) it comprises the four original members of Black Sabbath, (2) it records or tours under the name "Black Sabbath," and (3) it plays or records music consistent with Black Sabbath's musical style*. As a purist about Black Sabbath, I find myself in agreement with this principle the most. However, there are at least two problems with it. The first is that the original members themselves reject condition (2) by claiming to have started Black Sabbath in 1968, even though they did not change their name to "Black Sabbath" until late in 1969.[4] Nonetheless, we might not think this is such a big problem, since our governing concern need not be fealty to the band members' personal attitudes about the matter; after all, they are musicians, not metaphysicians.

However, a second, deeper problem with this principle is that the third condition's appeal to Black Sabbath's "style" covertly evokes some notion of what is essential about Black Sabbath's music. Thus our revised principle seems to smuggle in some notion about Sabbath's essence without explaining or making explicit what that is. Most importantly for our purposes, the principle doesn't explain why, if there is some essence to Black Sabbath's music, that essence cannot be captured or replicated by musicians other than the original members.

Of course, this is a matter of great controversy among Sabbath fans. As I mentioned at the beginning, some fans claim that the band continued to be Sabbath when Dio took over vocal duties for Ozzy, but ceased to be Sabbath once Dio left the band. Their rationale for this claim is often that the Dio-fronted era of Sabbath retained the essence of the original band, but that this essence was lost on those

subsequent recordings on which neither Dio nor Ozzy sang. There are also those fans who discovered Black Sabbath during Dio's tenure and who regard *Heaven and Hell* and *Mob Rules* as the albums that forged and defined their connection to the band. Both groups of fans will simply reject the revised principle on the grounds that there is no reason to think that the Ozzy era is somehow more authentically Black Sabbath than the Dio era. We'll return to the question of Sabbath's musical essence in due course.

Pushing on, we might say that *Black Sabbath is primarily a legal entity. A band is Black Sabbath if and only if it records or tours under the lawful ownership of the name "Black Sabbath*." Call this the "legal interpretation" of Black Sabbath. This principle is often cited by those fans who espouse the most permissive interpretation of what constitutes the identity of Black Sabbath, according to which every line-up that toured and recorded as "Black Sabbath," even ones in which Tony Iommi was the sole remaining original member, counts as an authentic version of the band. Defenders of the "legal interpretation" point to the fact that in the mid-1980s the other original members transferred ownership of the Sabbath name to Tony Iommi. Since Iommi then owned the name, these fans say, those line-ups that toured and recorded under the name "Black Sabbath" during this time period are indeed later versions of the band.

One problem with this interpretation is that legal ownership can usually be transferred to just about anyone—including people who bear no relation at all to the history of Black Sabbath. Suppose—thought experiment alert!—that Justin Bieber purchased the rights to the name "Black Sabbath" and performed his hit "One Less Lonely Girl" under its banner. Would that count as a genuine iteration of the band? Almost every Black Sabbath fan who has ever lived would insist that it would not. When you press fans who subscribe to the legal interpretation on this issue, they usually point out that since Iommi was always the primary songwriter and unofficial bandleader,[5] he is the essence of Black Sabbath. Despite what these fans profess, it's just not true that they defer to legal authority in settling questions about Black Sabbath's identity. Instead, they just identify the essence of Black Sabbath's music with Iommi's guitar playing.

Thus what the fans who defend the "permissive" interpretation usually end up saying is something like this: *a band is Black Sabbath if and only if (1) Tony Iommi is in the band and (2) the band records*

or tours under the name "Black Sabbath." But like before, a specter haunts our principle, and his name is Justin Bieber. For suppose that Tony Iommi gave up guitar to play the harp and let Justin Bieber join the band as both singer and songwriter. Would our permissive fans regard that band as Black Sabbath? Of course not. So the "permissive" fans really believe something like the following: *a band is Black Sabbath if and only if (1) Tony Iommi is in the band as the primary songwriter and guitar player and (2) the band records or tours under the name "Black Sabbath*." More than any other principle so far, this principle identifies Tony Iommi's songwriting contribution as what is essential about Black Sabbath.

Any Sabbath fan who is aware of Tony Iommi's unflagging determination to keep some version of the band going should have some sympathy for this principle.[6] However, while there might be much to be said for this principle, purists such as myself will respond that Bill Ward's jazz-inspired drumming, Geezer Butler's bass playing and lyrics, and Ozzy Osbourne's vocal delivery are all equally integral to the essence of the band. Likewise, Dio fans will point to his tenure in the band as a time of creative and artistic resurgence for Black Sabbath, as well as renewed interest from fans. Each Sabbath fan thus seems to have her own ideas about what constitutes the "real" Black Sabbath, and the thought experiments we've appealed to haven't been too helpful in deciding between them. It seems we've reached an impasse, with no party to the dispute willing to concede any ground. However, before we begin shouting "Sabbath, bloody Sabbath!" in anger, let's consider the possibility that we've been thinking about this problem in the wrong way.

Avoiding the Fictional Seduction of Bad Metaphysics

All along we've been assuming that there is some fact about Black Sabbath's identity that could, hopefully, be codified in a principle. Perhaps there is some determinate set of criteria that specifies the necessary and sufficient conditions of a band's being Black Sabbath, and I invite the reader who hasn't given up on such a project to propose principles and thought experiments for herself.[7] In the meantime, let's reconsider our assumption that there is a fact of the matter concerning which line-ups were "really" Black Sabbath.

Debates about Black Sabbath's identity usually—and usually very quickly—transform into debates about whether some era captures what those particular fans consider to be distinctively musically valuable. In truth, music resonates with us in highly personal ways, and we might express this in the thought that every Sabbath fan has her own "connection" to the music. For one person, that connection might begin and end with Iommi's riffs. For another, it might be Dio's operatic vocals on "Neon Knights." For me, it is that unique musical aura that only the original members were able to create. If you think the dark atmosphere of "Into the Void" or the proggy instrumentalism and existential dread of "Killing Yourself to Live" are emblematic examples of the "Sabbath Sound" you hold so dear, then Dio's power metal vocals and fascination with "dragons and kings" will seem off-putting.

Which brings me to why I am so reluctant to extend the Sabbath label beyond the Ozzy years. With all due respect to my fellow Sabbath fans, it is my contention that the post-Ozzy line-ups lack the sophistication and emotional depth of the original Sabbath Sound. To take just one example, consider "Hand of Doom," a song that communicates the horrors of a shell-shocked veteran's descent into addiction with eloquent intensity. Released at a time when vets were returning home from Vietnam, the song does not spare us in its candid portrayal of the psychological ravages of war. It begins with an isolated bass line as Ozzy delivers Geezer Butler's lyrics in a mocking, malevolent tone: "First it was the bomb / Vietnam, napalm / Disillusioning / You push the needle in." Thus establishing the sense of alienation and despair, the song crescendos into an urgent, pounding guitar riff, until finally giving way to the thump-thump-thump of Tony and Geezer's wall of sound: "You're having a good time, baby / But that won't last / Your mind's all full of things / You're living too fast / Go out, enjoy yourself / Don't bottle it in / You need someone to help you / Stick the needle in." The song ends as the original bass line slowly fades out, reminding the listener that there is no redemption awaiting our soldier, only death. This is deep, resonant music that touches on momentous themes with real artistry.

Some people who accept my general analysis—let's call them the "near purists"—feel that while Ozzy, Tony, and Geezer are essential, Bill Ward, being "just the drummer," can be replaced. As I write this, the proposed reunion tour of the original members of Black Sabbath

is disintegrating, as Ward found the contract he was offered "unsignable"[8] and the rest of the guys are planning to continue without him.[9] The powers-that-be are banking on the fact that most people would be just as content to see a partial reunion with a hired drummer as they would be to see the original four.

To the near purists, I suggest listening to the song "Black Sabbath," the very template for the Sabbath Sound. Pay attention to how Ward reacts to the interplay created by the tritone melody and Ozzy's sinister delivery. A light touch of the cymbal keeps the beat, but the drum fills are sparse, brooding, building sonic tension by straying just a bit off time, hanging back until a slow but emphatic roll brings them to the foreground. It is one of the most ominous pieces of drumming ever recorded, yet it never sounds overly assertive or self-indulgent, and most people wouldn't even notice it unless it were to go missing. Ward's preternatural feel gives the song a dimension—a heaviness, both musical and emotional—without which it wouldn't be nearly as dark and powerful. Ward's drumming is just as integral to the Sabbath Sound as Tony's riffs, Geezer's distorted rumble, and Ozzy's demonic whine.[10] Replace any of these guys, and you might have a great rock band—you just won't have Black Sabbath.

But while I don't think a partial reunion deserves the name "Black Sabbath," I also don't think that the above reflections are getting at any kind of deep metaphysical fact about the band's identity. Instead, what I think these reflections show is that such disagreements are really disagreements concerning a kind of aesthetic judgment. To my mind, the Ozzy era captured something distinctively aesthetically valuable, and it is that unique sound—that musical "essence," if you like—that I am referring to when I say that Black Sabbath is my favorite band.

In general, when we debate whether some line-up is really Black Sabbath, what we are really doing is allowing our aesthetic preferences to determine which line-up or line-ups the term "Black Sabbath" signifies. By doing this, we restrict the application of the term in such a way that what appears to be a debate over a kind of fact is really a debate over differing aesthetic values. If this is right, then questions like "Is it still Sabbath without Ozzy?" will admit of true and determinate answers only if there are objective facts about aesthetic value. For independent philosophical reasons, I do not think there are such facts—and consequently, no true answer to the question with

which we began. Some might take this to mean that we should just stop debating the question, but I will continue to argue my case as if there were a definitive answer, because having this debate with my fellow Sabbath fans is just too much fun. And besides, no one can listen to "Hand of Doom" and deny that the real Sabs have always been Ozzy, Tony, Geezer, and Bill. Right?

Notes

1. www.black-sabbath.com/theband/.
2. Kant uses the metaphor of a "court of reason" (in German: *ein Gerichtshof der Vernunft*) in "Über das Mißlingen aller philosophischen Versuche in der Theodicee" (On the Failure of All Philosophical Attempts at Theodicy), 255, which can be found on-line at http://korpora.zim.uni-duisburg-essen.de/Kant/aa08/255.html.
3. Thomas Hobbes, *De Corpore* ("On the Body"), Part 2, 11.7. Found on-line at www.philosophy.leeds.ac.uk/GMR/hmp/texts/modern/hobbes/decorpore.
4. This is implicit in the fact that Black Sabbath's 1978 tour was billed as their tenth anniversary tour.
5. From Ozzy's autobiography: "Officially, we didn't have a band leader. Unofficially, we all knew it was Tony. He was the oldest, the tallest, the best fighter, the best-looking, the most experienced, and the most obviously talented …. We all knew that Tony belonged right up there with the likes of Clapton and Hendrix. Pound for pound, he could match any of them. He was our ticket to the big time." *I Am Ozzy* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2010), 69.
6. This is well documented in Iommi's autobiography *Iron Man: My Journey Through Heaven and Hell with Black Sabbath* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2011).
7. Once, while listening to the song "I" off the *Dehumanizer* album, and while subjecting myself to the kind of rigorous self-examination that inevitably accompanies such a listening experience, I reconsidered my purism and entertained the possibility that a band counts as Sabbath if and only if (1) both Tony Iommi and Geezer Butler are in the band as the guitar player and bassist, respectively, (2) Bill Ward was at least offered the opportunity to play drums, and (3) the band toured and wrote under the name "Black Sabbath." What do you think of this principle? Can you think of any thought experiments that might challenge it?
8. www.black-sabbath.com/2012/02/bill-ward-out-of-reunion-maybe/.

9. www.black-sabbath.com/2012/02/the-sabs-respond-to-bill/.
10. But don't take my word for it. Here's Tony Iommi comparing Bill Ward to Vinny Appice and other drummers who have tried to fill Ward's shoes: "There's quite a difference between the way Vinny and Bill play drums. Vinny came in with all these fast rolls, which Bill didn't play at all. Bill was from the John Bonham and Cozy Powell camp. He was good, but he had his own style, he created his unique thing. Very unorthodox. Bill wouldn't play a straightforward beat, he always put some little bits in, like a percussionist.… In playing with Vinny I had to retrain my mind as well. I thought, Christ, he's really good, but he cannot be too precise on the old songs, he's got to be a bit laid back. Black Sabbath was never exact on the timing. With Bill we would start off in one tempo and end up in another; it was a natural feel and Bill had that feel. I had to go through everything with Vinny, as I later have with every drummer, trying to coax him into playing the old songs as they were," *Iron Man*, 197–198.